

***Hopes and Expectations for Woodward's:  
Community Perspectives  
A Report to the Portland Hotel Society***

Report, photography and graphic design by: Tanya Fink  
MA (Social Planning) Candidate  
School of Community and Regional Planning  
University of British Columbia  
May 2010

This report by Tanya Fink focuses on the new Woodward's development, and explores the possibilities and challenges for the emergence of an inclusive community on that site. In particular, since the report is specifically for the Portland Hotel Society (PHS), the non-profit society that manages 125 units of social housing at Woodward's, the goal of the report is to provide information that will assist PHS in ensuring that Woodward's is inclusive for its low-income tenants (p. 10). This in itself is worth reflecting upon. In the neighborhood as a whole, low-income people make up 70% of the population and are the clear majority. At Woodward's, they are overwhelmingly the minority, with 536 condo units, retail businesses aimed at middle class consumers, and a SFU arts centre occupying most of the project. The broader neighborhood demographics have been profoundly altered at the Woodward's site such that low-income residents now find themselves the target of intentional strategies of community inclusion. The report lays the groundwork for ensuring the assimilation of low-income people into the predominantly middle class social context at Woodward's. Does this foreshadow the fate of the DTES neighborhood as a whole?

The project centers on 27 semi-structured interviews of people involved in the various dimensions of the Woodward's development. These included residents of the low-income housing units, condo owners, people engaged in the retail businesses and non-profit initiatives, and key stakeholders (who are not identified). It does not appear that anyone from the 75 non-market family units was interviewed for this report. The interviews were based on 9 questions, and the comments / responses were gathered around three main topics: 1) reasons for being at Woodward's, 2) expectations, and 3) hopes for the future. It is noteworthy that while more space is devoted to synthesizing the comments of the two groups of residents, Fink allows the perspectives of the key stakeholders and the retail / non-profit initiatives to be heard first. This arrangement of sequence prioritizes the opinions of key players in the finance, development and governance structures at Woodward's and so reinforces the primary status of those with power.

Since the report devotes much of its attention to the residents living at Woodward's (20 of the 27 interviewees), a few observations on this aspect are worth noting. First, the number of condo owners interviewed (10) comprises less than 2% of the total number of condo units (536). This is a rather small sample compared to the low-income residents (10 of 125 units = 8%). Secondly, the low-income tenants were recruited with the help of PHS, while the condo owners responded to announcements of the project variously distributed (posters, leaflets, facebook). Yet of the 10 condo owners who took part in the interviews, some (specific number not disclosed) were PHS employees and DTES residents who purchased condo units there as a result of a special pre-sale deal that was offered to them (a slightly reduced price if they agreed to live in their condos for one year). "As a result," Fink writes, "many of the condo owners who participated in this study felt that they bought into an 'idea' and were wholeheartedly committed to creating an inclusive community at Woodward's" (p. 26). It is hard not to see here the significant role of PHS in this study. Not only was it written for them, but their presence is evident indirectly in influencing resident participation. One wonders how the centrality of PHS throughout this report, from the title page and acknowledgements at the beginning to the author's bio at the end, might skew it in a particular direction, one amenable to PHS interests.

Fink's summaries and direct quotations of the opinions offered by the 20 residents interviewed comprise the bulk of the report (see pp. 16-50). These are, however, carefully framed by a number of pages that lay out a brief history of Woodward's (p. 6), a description of the revitalization plans for the DTES by the City of Vancouver (CoV) using an urban renewal strategy called 'social mix' (p. 7) and a presentation of the theoretical framework and basic characteristics of inclusive communities (pp. 8-9). These preliminary components construct the lens through which the rest of the report can be seen, one that presents the current Woodward's project as a necessary, reasonable and natural good for the community, the achievement of historical progress, thoughtful planning and the good will of citizens. They also provide a set of filters that amplify or diminish the relevance of the comments made by the participants so that sentiments hopeful of community are highlighted while remarks that unmask the deeply problematic character of the mixed income community at Woodward's are construed as exceptional and left unexplored.

Fink maintains that the current Woodward's project has come full circle. Charles Woodward built the original Woodward's store in 1903 to serve the needs of Vancouver residents, and the principles most embodied in his business efforts were affordability and inclusivity. These same values, Fink argues, mark the new Woodward's development. She writes of the original Woodward's, "It started as an attempt to cater to westward settlers and continued to include many diverse groups throughout its 90-year existence in the community" (p. 6).

This statement clearly reveals the role Woodward's originally played in serving the needs of the settler society in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and therefore its essential function within the colonial project of European settlement. Of course the historical process of colonization produced displacement, cultural destruction and death for the indigenous people of this land. In this way, the original Woodward's played an important part in the political project of colonial domination and displacement, promoting the interests of the settler community and furthering its oppression of the indigenous inhabitants of the region. Perhaps Woodward's has come full circle as it now serves the needs of large property developers, urban planners, business owners, and middle class residents, while it simultaneously unleashes wider forces of displacement within the low-income community of the DTES. Indeed, it is these broader impacts of Woodward's on the surrounding low-income neighborhood that receives little if any attention in this report. The blinkered concentration on the Woodward's site itself and the potential (or not) for an inclusive community there seems to have eliminated from view the detrimental effect the whole development has had and will continue to have on the DTES community.

Interestingly, Fink tells the story of Woodward's without a single word about the intense struggle of the community for over a decade once the store closed its doors in 1993. She glosses over this history by simply stating, "Woodward's sat in limbo for over 13 years before construction began on what we know it as today" (p. 6). She has completely eliminated a marvelous history of struggle by many within the DTES community to preserve Woodward's for its majority low-income population. There is no reference to the demonstrations, vigils, and celebrations that took place outside the empty Woodward's building; no reference to the 90 day resistance of Woodsquat. In her introduction, she mentions these years as a time of community debate, with some (?) wanting Woodward's to be completely market housing, and others (the majority of the community) wanting it to be exclusively low-income housing. Her history erases this period of intense struggle for social housing at Woodward's, and thereby silences significant community voices of opposition. This is characteristic of her entire report which minimizes critical stances of the Woodward's development within the DTES community, by describing dissent as a challenge to overcome (p. 4), a discouragement to the key stakeholders of the new Woodward's development (p. 12), and an obstacle to community integration (p. 64), and by marginalizing its argument through a mere reproduction of a single poster in Appendix One (p. 54).

The dominant discourse that runs throughout the report is the idea of social mix as a tactic of neighborhood revitalization. Fink's main narrative plot is that the DTES was increasingly abandoned by the senior levels of government and the result was a plethora of social problems and economic

disinvestment. Then along came the CoV with its plan for urban renewal and determination to fix the problems of inadequate housing and inequality in the DTES. “The City’s revitalization strategy plans to bring back the health, safety and liveability of the neighbourhood for all who want to live there” (p. 7). The concept of social mix was to be the agent for such revitalization in the DTES, which the CoV conceives as increasing market housing in the area without displacing low-income residents. Woodward’s is the embodiment of the theory behind this plan.

Fink herself acknowledges (and cites a number of studies in support) that the policy of social mix and the mixed income communities that are created do not turn out all that well for the low-income residents of the neighborhood (pp. 7, 51). The resultant economic inequality threatens community coherence, heightens class tensions, and undermines the experience of inclusivity. Consequently, she argues, there needs to be an “earnest intention to create more inclusive communities” (p. 8), and Woodward’s is a test site for this endeavor. Drawing on the work of others, she lists and defines the characteristics of an inclusive community: integrative and cooperative, interactive, invested, diverse, equitable, accessible and sensitive, participatory, and safe. Her conclusion, after all the resident interviews, is that Woodward’s has few if any of these traits, though she doesn’t explore why this is the case. She seems to believe that intentional effort can remedy their feeble presence or complete absence from the ‘community’ at Woodward’s despite the statements of residents that indicate otherwise.

There is something fundamentally flawed in Fink’s entire project. The policy of social mix as it has been implemented at Woodward’s creates the need for strategies of inclusion because it has radically altered the social and economic dynamics of the neighborhood. In the DTES generally, low-income residents are the majority and the neighborhood contains numerous services and amenities that serve their needs. They have configured social relations, patterns of community involvement and friendships within this neighborhood context. It is their space, their community.

Within the Woodward’s development, the 125 units of social housing constitute 17% of the residents, and there are no social services within the building itself. The retail stores are mostly priced out of their range of affordability, and the public spaces hold little or no interest to them, based on her interviews. They all moved into Woodward’s having previously lived in the neighborhood and so are local to it, yet within the structure of the new Woodward’s complex itself they are the ones who must now struggle for inclusion. When Fink posits an ‘inclusive community’ paradigm of social integration, she is already assuming that the PHS tenants need inclusion, that they are mostly excluded within the spatial and economic stratification that Woodward’s constructs, all within a neighborhood in which they are the majority. The vast majority of the condo owners have come into their neighborhood with more wealth and status and now dominant the space in every way. At Woodward’s, the locals have been displaced from their majority position, separated off into their own building, shut off from the amenities and resources enjoyed by the middle class condo owners.

The inclusivity framework contains within it this hidden displacement, where those who are the majority in the community are the (potentially troublesome and certainly stigmatized) minority at Woodward’s, and must now fight for inclusion. They are aware of their status as the ‘lucky to be selected and managed’ residents of the new social housing. The quotes in this report give voice to this precarious ‘belonging’ to the Woodward’s ‘community’. The entire discourse of social mix and inclusive communities, then, is the ideology that serves the interests of the wealthy condo owners and retail operators (who can pursue their upwardly mobile urban lifestyles and enhance profits, assisted by CoV tax exemptions), and opens up space for developer profits through gentrification, even while it espouses a rhetoric of revitalization, inclusivity and community well-being.

The problem here identified stems from the fact that Fink in this report pays such little attention to the wider community. Remarks and observations are left to Appendix Three, and presented in maps, images, brief captions, and bullet points. It lacks serious research, critical analysis and sustained argumentation. She recognizes that certain elements of the surrounding neighborhood make the integration of Woodward’s a serious challenge, but doesn’t explore these to any extent. Here it seems

the uncritical acceptance of the theory of social mix has muffled thorough consideration of this crucial dimension of the Woodward's project, i.e., the impact of Woodward's on the immediate DTES community. If anything, the basic concern of the final section of the report is how the community outside Woodward's might impact its ability to develop inclusive social interaction among its residents (see p. 64), rather than how the Woodward's development itself might negatively impact the strong community around it. She states, "Whether or not Woodward's can become a valued part of this neighbourhood is vital to the future inclusivity within it and around it" (p. 64). The more pressing issue for many low-income residents of the DTES is how the Woodward's project, with its majority of middle income condo owners and amenities to serve them, and the ripple effect of gentrification that such a development produces, will detrimentally impact them.

By erasing the history of colonization and struggle for social housing, upholding the paradigm of social mix dominant at the municipal planning department, exploring inclusivity from the vantage point of integrating the poor into sites newly occupied by wealth, and failing to take seriously the vision, vitality and fears of the majority low-income residents of the neighborhood, Fink has served the purposes of the new colonialism that gentrification represents. Despite the many contradictions and uncertainties contained within her report that undermine the strength of her own optimism for community at Woodward's, she has promoted efforts to normalize inequality in the DTES and assimilate the low-income residents to the interests of the wealthy and socially privileged. In this way, she has facilitated the triumph of asymmetrical power in the neighborhood, even as she seeks to strengthen the experience of community for low-income residents at Woodward's.

With the completion of the Woodward's project, the forces of gentrification have established a substantial beachhead in the DTES, and its mercenary army of invaders and accomplices will continue to expand the domain of wealth and power by seizing property and displacing local low-income residents. The legitimating logic of social mix and gentrification can be subtle and persuasive, especially for the educated, but the suffering it inflicts on the minds, bodies and lives of people in this neighborhood is profound. No matter how appealing it seems or how benevolent it presents itself, gentrification is structural violence; community resistance is necessary.